

J. C. SQUIRE IS AN ORIGINAL POET WITH A DEFINITE
AND VALID WAY OF LOOKING AT LIFE."—*THE DIAL*

THE BIRDS
AND OTHER POEMS
J. C. SQUIRE

In this book of lyric verse, individual in feeling and rhythm, there is a strain of rare simplicity and a power of expression arising from a comprehension of beauty in nature and in the secret places of the soul of man.

J. C. Squire, one of the most versatile and influential men of letters in England, is Editor of London *MERCURY* and author of "William the Silent," "Poems: First Series," etc. For the past five years his writings under the name of Solomon Eagle have been a feature of the *NEW STATESMAN*, and he produced incomparably the best satires and satiric verse brought forth by the war.

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THE BIRDS
AND OTHER POEMS

J. C. SQUIRE

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BY

J. C. SQUIRE



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THE BIRDS

THE BIRDS

Within mankind's duration, so they say,
Khephren and Ninus lived but yesterday.
Asia had no name till man was old
And long had learned the use of iron and gold;
And æons had passed, when the first corn was
planted,
Since first the use of syllables was granted.

Men were on earth while climates slowly
swung,
Fanning wide zones to heat and cold, and long
Subsidence turned great continents to sea,
And seas dried up, dried up interminably,
Age after age; enormous seas were dried
Amid wastes of land. And the last monsters
died.

THE BIRDS

Earth wore another face. O since that prime
Man with how many works has sprinkled time!
Hammering, hewing, digging tunnels, roads;
Building ships, temples, multiform abodes.
How, for his body's appetites, his toils
Have conquered all earth's products, all her
soils;

And in what thousand thousand shapes of art
He has tried to find a language for his heart!

Never at rest, never content or tired:
Insatiate wanderer, marvellously fired,
Most grandly piling and piling into the air
Stones that will topple or arch he knows not
where.

And yet did I, this spring, think it more
strange,
More grand, more full of awe, than all that
change,
And lovely and sweet and touching unto tears,
That through man's chronicled and unchron-
icled years,

THE BIRDS

And even into that unguessable beyond
The water-hen has nested by a pond,
Weaving dry flags into a beaten floor,
The one sure product of her only lore.
Low on a ledge above the shadowed water
Then, when she heard no men, as nature
taught her,
Plashing around with busy scarlet bill
She built that nest, her nest, and builds it still.

O let your strong imagination turn
The great wheel backward, until Troy unburn,
And then unbuild, and seven Troys below
Rise out of death, and dwindle, and outflow,
Till all have passed, and none has yet been
there:

Back, ever back. Our birds still crossed the
air;

Beyond our myriad changing generations
Still built, unchanged, their known inhabita-
tions.

A million years before Atlantis was

THE BIRDS

Our lark sprang` from some hollow in the
grass,
Some old soft hoof-print in a tussock's shade;
And the wood-pigeon's smooth snow-white
eggs were laid,
High amid green pines' sunset-coloured
shafts,
And rooks their villages of twiggy rafts
Set on the tops of elms, where elms grew then,
And still the thumbling tit and perky wren
Popped through the tiny doors of cosy balls
And the blackbird lined with moss his high-
built walls;
A round mud cottage held the thrush's young,
And straws from the untidy sparrow's hung.
And, skimming forktailed in the evening air,
When man first was were not the martens
there?
Did not those birds some human shelter crave,
And stow beneath the cornice of his cave
Their dry tight cups of clay? And from each
door
Peeped on a morning wiseheads three or four.

THE BIRDS

Yes, daw and owl, curlew and crested hern,
Kingfisher, mallard, water-rail and tern,
Chaffinch and greenfinch, wagtail, stonechat,
ruff,

Pied warbler, robin, fly-catcher and chough,
Missel-thrush, magpie, sparrow-hawk and jay,
Built, those far ages gone, in this year's way.
And the first man who walked the cliffs of
Rome,

As I this year, looked down and saw the same
Blotches of rusty red on ledge and cleft
With grey-green spots on them, while right
and left

A dizzying tangle of gulls were floating and
flying,

Wheeling and crossing and darting, crying
and crying,

Circling and crying, over and over and over,
Crying with swoop and hover and fall and
recover.

And below on a rock against the grey sea
fretted,

Pipe-necked and stationary and silhouetted,

THE BIRDS

Cormorants stood in a wise, black, equal row
Above the nests and long blue eggs we know.

O delicate chain over all the ages stretched,
O dumb tradition from what far darkness
 fetched:

Each little architect with its one design
Perpetual, fixed and right in stuff and line,
Each little ministrant who knows one thing,
One learned rite to celebrate the spring.
Whatever alters else on sea and shore,
These are unchanging: man must still explore.

PROCESSES OF THOUGHT

PROCESSES OF THOUGHT

I

I find my mind as it were a deep water.

Sometimes I play with a thought and hammer
and bend it,
Till tired and displeased with that I toss it
away,
Or absently let it slip to the yawning water:
And down it sinks, forgotten for many a day.

But a time comes when tide or tempest washes
it
High on the beach, and I find that shape of
mine,

THE BIRDS

Or I haul it out from the depths on some
casual rope,

Or, passing over that spot in quiet shine,

I see, where my boat's shadow makes deep the
water,

A patch of colour, far down, from the bottom
apart,

A wavering sign like the gleam from an
ancient anchor,

Brown fixing and fleeting flakes; and I feel
my heart

Wake to a strange excitement; so that I stop,
Put up my paddles and dredge with a careful
net:

And I catch it, and see it stir, and feel its
weight,

And pull till it nears and breaks from the
water wet.

PROCESSES OF THOUGHT

And my eyes dwell on that old abandoned
thing
Recovered by chance. For the shape I had
found so dull
Has crusted and changed in secrecy and
silence,
And its surface shines like a pearl, most beautiful.

II

In bed I lie, and my thoughts come fling by,
All forms and faces, cheerful, serene and sad:
Some clear, some mistily showing and frag-
mentary,
Some altered in size or shape since last they
were seen.

But O last, you group of merry ones!
Lord knows when I saw you before, but I met
you once,
The whole collection of you, impudent-eyed;
And now, rosy and grinning, with linked arms
You go swingingly by, turning your faces to
mine,
I laugh aloud; you bad lots; you are a secret,
That nobody else knows.

PROCESSES OF THOUGHT

And you it was that made me break the procession

(While memory gave me still the power of summons),

And call up all I could of a half-hour's thoughts

To parade them across this proscenium of my skull

In the order they came in, more carefully recognising

The old, and remarking which have developed or changed.

And as for you, you rogues, I am almost certain

There are one or two more of you now than once there were.

* * * *

Good-bye! Good-bye! Dance through the dark door

In to the life that somewhere else you lead.

And one day I shall all unwittingly call

Some word you know as a signal, or you'll see

THE BIRDS

Someone else coming my way; you'll suddenly
follow,
And you'll appear again, quite possibly
Bringing new friends—who are sure to be just
as bad.

III

Into the pits of my heart and brain,
My eyes, ears, nose, tongue, fingers, like five
gardeners
Are shovelling sights, sounds, odours, savours,
contacts,
While I, their master, casually nod, and most
times
Stand idly by, looking at something else,
Forgetting that the work is going on
And only fully conscious of my servants
When something they move is consonant with
my mood
And draws my notice; or some other thing,
More strange than usual or stronger in its
impact
Makes them exclaim and call to bid me watch.

THE BIRDS

And then in a ground of more than our dimensions

Those quietly flowing cascades of things are hid.

They are buried in those illimitable fields,
And ever as they are swallowed by the earth
The steady hours passing in procession
Walk over them and trample them well down
Out of sight, levelling all the soil.

Then some time my returning feet uncover them

(My slaves are all agog with recognition)
Or else perhaps I come and idly dig
To see what thing I can find, and out there comes

Some old form buried twenty years ago
Now called a memory.

Or marking well the place where one was put
Find it and more, drawn thither under the ground,

PROCESSES OF THOUGHT

Tangled with others as flower-roots with roots
Into a new festoon, or one old image,
Wearing others like gems. And that's crea-
tion.

AIRSHIP OVER SUBURB

AIRSHIP OVER SUBURB

A smooth blue sky with puffed motionless
clouds.

Standing over the plain of red roofs and bushy
trees
The bright coloured shell of the large enam-
elled sky.

Out of the distance pointing, a cut dark shape
That moves this way at leisure, then hesitates
and turns:

And its darkness suddenly dies as it turns and
shows

A gleaming silver, white against even the
whitest cloud.

THE BIRDS

Across the blue and the low small clouds it
moves

Level, with a floating cloud-like motion of its
own,

Peaceful, sunny and slow, a thing of summer
itself,

Above the basking earth, travelling the clouds
and the sky.

HARLEQUIN

HARLEQUIN

Moonlit woodland, veils of green,
Caves of empty dark between;
Veils of green from rounded arms
Drooping, that the moonlight charms:
Tranced the trees, grass beneath
Silent. . . .

Like a stealthy breath,
Mask and wand and silver skin,
Sudden enters Harlequin.

Hist! Hist! Watch him go,
Leaping limb and pointing toe,
Slender arms that float and flow,
Curving wand above, below;
Flying, gliding, changing feet;
Onset merging in retreat,

THE BIRDS

Not a shadow of sound there is
But his motion's gentle hiss,
Till one fluent arm and hand
Suddenly circles, and the wand
Taps a bough far overhead,
"Crack," and then all noise is dead.
For he halts, and for a space
Stands erect with upward face,
Taut and tense to the white
Message of the moon's light.

What is he thinking of, you ask;
Caught you the eyes behind the mask?
Whence did he come, where would he go?
Answers but the resuming flow
Of that swift continuous glide,
Whispering from side to side,
Silvered boughs, branches dim,
All the world's a frame for him;
All the trees standing around
On the fascinated ground,
See him swifter, swifter, sweep,
Dazzling, till one wildest leap . . .

HARLEQUIN

Whisht! he kneels. And he listens.
How his steady silver glistens.

He was listening; he was there;
Flash! he went. To the air
He a waiting ear had bent,
Silent; but before he went
Something somewhere else to seek,
He moved his lips as though to speak.

And we wait, and in vain,
For he will not come again.
Earth, grass, wood, and air,
As we stare, and we stare,
Which that fierce life did hold,
Tired, dim, void, cold.

WINTER NIGHTFALL

WINTER NIGHTFALL

The old yellow stucco
Of the time of the Regent
Is flaking and peeling:
The rows of square windows
In the straight yellow building
Are empty and still;
And the dusty dark evergreens
Guarding the wicket
Are draped with wet cobwebs,
And above this poor wilderness
Toneless and sombre
Is the flat of the hill.

THE BIRDS

They said that a colonel
Who long ago died here
Was the last one to live here:
An old retired colonel,
Some Fraser or Murray,
 I don't know his name;
Death came here and summoned him,
And the shells of him vanished
Beyond all speculation;
And silence resumed here,
Silence and emptiness,
 And nobody came.

WINTER NIGHTFALL

Was it wet when he lived here,
Were the skies dun and hurrying,
Was the rain so irresolute?
Did he watch the night coming,
Did he shiver at nightfall
 Before he was dead?
Did the wind go so creepily,
Chilly and puffing,
With drops of cold rain in it?
Was the hill's lifted shoulder
So lowering and menacing,
 So dark and so dread?

THE BIRDS

Did he turn through his doorway
And go to his study,
And light many candles?
And fold in the shutters,
And heap up the fireplace
 To fight off the damp?
And muse on his boyhood,
And wonder if India
Ever was real?
And shut out the loneliness
With pig-sticking memoirs
 And collections of stamps?

WINTER NIGHTFALL

Perhaps. But he's gone now,
He and his furniture
Dispersed now for ever;
And the last of his trophies,
Antlers and photographs,
 Heaven knows where.
And there's grass in his gateway,
Grass on his footpath,
Grass on his door-step;
The garden's grown over,
The well-chain is broken,
 The windows are bare.

THE BIRDS

And I leave him behind me,
For the straggling, discoloured
Rags of the daylight,
And hills and stone walls
And a rick long forgotten
 Of blackening hay:
The road pale and sticky,
And cart-ruts and nail marks,
And wind-ruffled puddles,
And the slop of my footsteps
In this desolate country's
 Cadaverous clay.

TWO SONGS

SONG

You are my sky; beneath your circling kindness

My meadows all take in the light and grow;
Laugh with the joy you've given,
The joy you've given,
And open in a thousand buds, and blow.

But when you are sombre, sad, averse, forgetful,

Heavily veiled by clouds that brood with rain,

Dumbly I lie all shadowed,
I lie all shadowed,
And dumbly wait for you to shine again.

SONG

The heaven is full of the moon's light,
The earth fades below.
In this vast empty world of night
I only know.

Pale-shining trees and moonlit fields,
The bird's tune,
And my night-flowering heart that yields
Her fragrance to the moon.

A FAR PLACE

A FAR PLACE

Sheltered, when the rain blew over the hills it
was,
Sunny all day when the days of summer were
long,
Beyond all rumour of labouring towns it was,
But at dawn and evening its trees were noisy
with song.

There were four elms on the southward lawn
standing,
Their great trunks evenly set in a square
Of shadowed grass in spring pierced with
crocuses,
And their tops met high in the empty air.

THE BIRDS

Where the morning rose the grey church was
below us,

If we stood by the porch we saw on either
hand

The ground falling, the trees falling, and
meadows,

A river, hamlets and spires: a chequered land,

A wide country where cloud shadows went
chasing

Mile after mile, diminishing fast, until

They met the far blue downs; but round the
corner

The western garden lay lonely under the hill.

.

And closed in the western garden, under the
hillside,

Where silence was and the rest of the world
was gone,

We saw and took the curving year's munifi-
cence:

Changing from flower to flower the garden
shone.

A FAR PLACE

Early its walks were fringed with little rock-
plants,
Sprays and tufts of blossom, white, yellow,
and blue,
And all about were sprinkled stars of nar-
cissus,
And swathes of tulips all over the garden
grew.

White groups and pink, red, crimson and
lemon-yellow,
And the yellow-and-red-streaked tulips once
loved by a boy;
Red and yellow their stiff and varnished
petals,
And the scent of them stings me still with a
youthful joy.

And in the season of perfect and frailest
beauty,
Pear-blossom broke and the lilacs' waxen
cones,

THE BIRDS

And a tranced laburnum trailing its veils of
yellow
Tenderly drooped over the ivied stones.

The lilacs browned, a breath dried the labur-
num,
The swollen peonies scattered the earth with
blood,
And the rhododendrons shed their sumptuous
mantles,
And the marshalled irises unsceptred stood.

And the borders filled with daisies and pied
sweet-williams,
And busy pansies; and there as we gazed and
dreamed,
And breathed the swooning smell of the
packed carnations,
The present was always the crown of all: it
seemed

A FAR PLACE

Each month more beautiful sprang from a
 robe discarded,
The year all effortless dropt the best away
And struck the heart with loveliness new, more
 lavish;
When the clambering rose had blown and died,
 by day

The broad-leaved tapering many-shielded
 hollyhocks
Stood like pillars and shone to the August sun,
The glimmering cups of waking evening prim-
 roses
Filled the dusk now the scent of the rose was
 done.

.
A wall there was and a door to the rose-
 garden,
And out of that a gate to the orchard led,
And there was the last hedge, and the turf
 sloped upward
Till the sky was cut by the hill's line overhead.

THE BIRDS

And thither at times we climbed, and far
 below us
That world that had made the world remote
 was seen,
Small, a huddle of russet roofs and chimneys,
And its guard of elms like bushes against the
 green:

One spot in the country, little and mild and
 homely,
The nearest house of a wide populous
 plain. . . .
But down at evening under the stars and the
 branches
In the whispering garden we lost the world
 again.

. . . .

Whispering, faint, the garden under the hill-
 side . . .
Under the stars. . . . Is it true that we lived
 there long?

A FAR PLACE

Was it certainly so? Did ever we know that
dwelling,
Breathe that night, and hear in the night that
song?

